

Omar

BY FRANK CONDON

EVERY so often somebody asks me how long Harmony Childs, Omar Gill and I have been teamed up together, and whenever that query arises it makes me think again of dear old Joseph City. It was in that quaint little one-horse town that we two first laid unsuspecting eyes upon the form and person of Harmony Childs.

It happened so many years ago that I prefer not to go into the vital statistics. We were all very much younger than we are now, although not a bit poorer, showing you that a life of lively and indiscriminate crime is more or less a mistake if a man aims to die rich. Joseph City was, and still remains, one of those slab-sided Western towns, with two trains daily, three thousand inmates, and a scandal in the choir of the Second Baptist Church.

I REMEMBER that Omar Gill and I were comparatively new friends at the time, bound together by ties of poverty and a couple of roving dispositions, and we departed one sultry afternoon in Joseph City from the extreme rear end of what the English jocularly call a goods train. We departed from our particular goods train about four impulsive leaps ahead of an irate brakeman armed with a coupling pin and betraying brisk familiarity with its use.

Thereupon we discovered that we had landed in the midst of Joseph City, and after investigation we took a small bungalow in the outskirts. It was not difficult to take this modest home, because no one else seemed to be using it at the time. We moved in quietly through a rear window and prepared to enjoy what calm the future might hold.

Omar immediately began to display unsuspected gifts with reference to groceries, fancy provisions and all forms of edible human food. At dusk he would saunter forth into Joseph City, armed with nothing but a pleasant manner, and return later to our bungalow, very red and breathless, but with his arms full of canned corn, dried beef, Irish potatoes and miscellaneous sundries.

For a week everything was lovely, and then we met Eli Purman. I shall never forget Eli, and neither will Omar. He was a red-faced man, with a rolling countenance, the chin of which formed the letter "m" as written out by schoolgirls struggling with the round-hand system, and he owned and operated the Joseph City Hotel.

In an unguarded moment Eli waxed friendly and invited us to walk into his sanitary bar and have at least one. From that moment the hotel was our club.

In those fortuitous days it was Omar's totally unfounded but incurable conviction that he could sing tenor. There is no hallucination in the human breast harder to eradicate than the firm belief that one can sing tenor, and for years Omar Gill had freely used up good American atmosphere in attempting to prove out his theory.

Of an evening at the hotel, surrounded by a cheerful group, he often raised his voice in song, and the customers applauded and bought for both of us. There is no audience, of course, less capacious or more warmly enthusiastic than a small group of adult males standing along the moist side of a bar and listening to a fellow biped in the act of song.

Among our admirers none was more outspoken than Eli Purman. He actually believed that Omar could sing and that I was a raconteur with a great future. When we arrived one evening earlier than usual Eli greeted us somewhat excitedly.

"THERE'S a man looking for you, Omar," he announced. "He's coming in later."

"A man looking for me," Omar repeated, and we glanced at each other sharply. I thought of the bungalow and the groceries, and of the last town wherein we had resided, and from which we had departed late at night and under full speed. Any man looking for us in those days usually wore a small metal ornament on his vest.

"He was in here a while ago," Eli continued, overlooking our alarm. "Nice-seeming man, too. He's looking for a singer."

"What's his name?" I asked, still coldly suspicious.

"Professor Harmony Childs," replied Eli, and that was the first time in my life I ever heard of the genius who was to ally himself with us and guide our destinies for all these checkered years.

"He's got some kind of a show," our host explained. "You may make some money, so you'd better see him."

We lingered with Eli and decided that any one named Professor Harmony Childs, owner of a road show, would scarcely be hunting for us on legal matters, and in about fifteen

minutes the door opened and Professor Childs came in.

Then, as now, he was a tall, handsome man, dressed quietly like a notary public, self-possessed, and owner of a magnetic personality. He was, and is, one of the most persuasive talkers on the face of the earth, with a fine booming voice and a system of careless gestures.

On this fateful occasion he wore a light cane and a plug hat that glistened like a seal. He nodded genially to Eli Purman and came over.

"Here you are, Mr. Childs," said Eli. "This is the Omar Gill I spoke about."

"This is George," Eli continued, nodding carelessly toward me. "Meet Mr. Childs."

We shook hands with the stranger, after which he invited all present to step up and hook one as it passed.

"Mr. Purman tells me you sing tenor," Harmony said to Omar, and from here on I shall continue to refer to him as Harmony, because it isn't natural to call him Mr. Childs. I have called him a lot of things in my time, but never Mr. Childs.

"I am only a fair singer," Omar replied with that bogus modesty observable in all tenor singers. "I wouldn't call myself a wonder."

"GO ON, sing for Mr. Childs," Eli urged, and Harmony smiled encouragingly. Omar backed himself over against the free lunch and took a long breath.

"Fine," said the professor, when the noises ended, and making out he was about to buy again. "I'm going to hire you. That's all I need to hear."

"I knew you would the minute you heard him sing," Eli said heartily. "Omar has the kind of a voice that mighty few people appreciate."

"I can tell that," Harmony remarked, looking again at Omar with that critical stare I have come to know so well in later years. "Are you as strong as you look, Mr. Gill?"

"Strong?" Omar murmured. "I mean, have you a rugged constitution? You see, you're not a large man. Nobody would call you a large man, Mr. Gill."

"I know they wouldn't," Omar replied, "but I'm strong enough. I used to drive a truck in Fresno. Can a man pursue vinegar barrels up the back end of a dray without being strong?"

"He looks strong and wiry," Harmony continued, feeling of Omar's shoulder blades and speaking to Eli. "Still, you can't be certain."

"I tell you I am strong," Omar retorted in some heat. "Do I have to sing while carrying a horse? What's singing for your show got to do with how strong I am?"

"Would you be willing to start for \$30 a week?" Harmony inquired, and at this point I kicked Omar swiftly to indicate that such was undoubtedly the case.

Omar nodded. "Of course," he said. "I wouldn't want to sing long for \$30 a week."

"You won't," said Harmony. Then he sat himself on a table and explained at length.

He stated that he was the sole owner of Professor Childs's Mammoth Road Show, which consisted of refined vaudeville acts, with interpolations by Mr. Childs himself, usually of a light and amusing character. The show was coming from the East, and was to open for a week's performance at the Joseph City Opera House on the following Monday evening.

"And my regular tenor is temporarily ineligible," Harmony remarked casually, "so if I failed to engage you, Mr. Gill, that spot on my program would remain vacant."

THE same night Harmony moved his trunks into the hotel and surrounded himself with the transient luxuries of Joseph City. At intervals Omar and I visited him in his rooms, and Omar rehearsed his coming melodic debauch. I sat in the corner and appeared to be Omar's manager, because half of

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that thirty was mine, we having an ironclad agreement to split all loot fifty-fifty. On one of these visits Harmony forced Omar to remove his coat so he could take chest soundings and examine the little man's torso.

"I don't get this bird at all," Omar complained later to me. "You'd think he was hiring a lumberjack instead of a tenor singer. What for does he want to stand me up and listen to my heart?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"I did ask him, and he told me he always likes to know that his tenors are strong, husky gents."

That was all Harmony ever explained. He selected six songs for Omar, and they were all reliable veterans in the world of melody. He explained that they had always gone fairly well, down to and including "Home, Sweet Home" and "The Angel's Prayer."

"You'll only have to sing two or three each night," he told Omar. "Your act comes at the end of the show, and the audience will be getting ready to go home."

So Omar learned his six songs and sang them for Harmony until the new boss indicated his tenor was now about ripe. And finally the Childs Road Show arrived in Joseph City in the day coach. We went down to the railroad to meet the trouper, and there we encountered Kearney's Trained Dogs, Hiller and Hiller, magicians of the air, and the Barcelona Bear Cat.

The artists climbed down wearily from the last car of the Joseph City "Cannon Ball," which was partly a freight train, and shook hands with their employer.

They were introduced to me and Omar, and I noticed that they regarded the little man with what seemed to be a certain sad sympathy, coupled with the usual professional scorn.

"Ah!" said the Barcelona Bear Cat, mournfully smiling upon Omar. "Another tenor. I hope you are in good health, Mr. Gill."

Omar replied that his health was perfect, but I could see him wondering.

The Barcelona Bear Cat was a Spanish dancer and fandango expert, billed as Conchita Rosario. Actually she glanced up from her corned beef and cabbage when hailed as Gertie Quinn, which was her right name, just as Oil City, Pa., was her right home, and not Barcelona. Hiller and Hiller were a couple of antiquated trapeze artists. They were unusually large persons to be whizzing through the air, and when I knew them first I was always afraid the trapeze would break.

Kearney's Trained Dogs consisted of Kearney and four fox terriers, and I discovered that nobody in that act was ever sober, except the dogs.

TOWARD the end of the week Omar signed up a truce with a local celebrity named Bert Coates, who played the Opera House piano when not engaged at his regular trade, which was cooping. Omar and Bert came to an understanding and Mr. Coates learned that there was only one way to accompany Mr. Gill on a pianoforte. You gave Omar about half a block start and then followed him, making as little noise as possible.

The Road Show was strictly an entertainment without the usual fees. Harmony posted up red bills all over town, announcing that the Great Childs Road Show would begin entertaining the public on the Monday following, and would continue for one week, there being no charge for any seat in the house.

The man who owned the Opera House looked at these announcements in alarm and then collected his week's rent in advance. I didn't blame him.

"There is what you call a hunch," I said to Omar, referring to the collection in advance. "You dash down and get our \$30. I have a feeling



that the time for us to annex that thirty is right now."

Omar tried for his week's pay, but without conspicuous success. Harmony simply backed him into a corner of the hotel bar and informed him that artists in his company were never paid in advance.

ON THAT famous opening Monday night one of the largest crowds ever seen in Joseph City gathered before the Opera House. The performance began with a piano solo at the hands of young Bert Coates. Bert being the entire orchestra. Bert was an earnest, well meaning piano player and in need of a haircut, which was his closest resemblance to Ignace Jan Paderewski.

Then Professor Childs walked out in front of the curtain and began to hypnotize those simple souls. It was a friendly little speech, in which he hoped that one and all would enjoy themselves, and he mentioned the lack of admission fees.

"You wonder what I have up my sleeve?" he asked smiling genially down upon us. "You are puzzled by this free entertainment, and no wonder. I shall soon show you, because we are all grown-up, sensible people, and you know very well that I cannot afford to rent this fine theater, pay for the various acts which you are about to behold and thus lavishly entertain you for nothing. Whatever we get in this world we pay for in some way, and I assure you with great frankness that you are going to pay me for this excellent performance before the week is out, although there will be no admission charge on any evening up to and including the final performance on Saturday night. I thank you for this noble turnout, and would say on behalf of myself and company that we will do our best to please you. If you will now watch the curtain rise you will observe Kearney's Trained Dogs, the most intelligent animal act ever offered the public."

Then Kearney came on with his dogs. It was a fair act, and when the curtain descended Professor Childs again strolled into view and picked up his remarks.

He continued in a jocular vein, calling attention to various civic affairs and keeping his hearers in high good humor, and as he rambled on I saw very plainly that this Harmony Childs was a gifted cuss in the use of words and parts of speech.

"This is supposed to be a mighty smart little town," he remarked after he had warmed up a bit, and as he spoke he opened a box of cigars and placed it on a small table beside him. "In all such towns there is usually a certain reckless spirit of adventure if you can only stir it up. I propose to do so stir it. I have here a box of a well known brand of cigars that sell for five cents each. I suppose you could call this a fair five-cent cigar. Is there any man in the audience with enough sporting blood in him to pay me \$1 for one of these five-cent cigars?"

He lifted the vegetable product from the box and held it up. He turned it gently between his fingers, like a schoolmaster showing his class



When I opened my eyes a sweet-faced nurse was feeding Omar some milk through a tube. I have never seen a sadder spectacle.

something. There was an astonished silence around me.

"At the hotel," Harmony continued cheerfully, "some one told me that this was a live-wire town and always ready to take a chance. We shall see. Is there any gentleman present willing to buy a cheap nickel cigar for the sum of \$1?"

Another silence followed, and then a hesitating voice was raised at the back of the house.

"Ah," said Harmony. "There is at least one sport in Joseph City. Will the gentleman walk down to the stage and show himself?"

The gentleman would and did. He was a tall, raw-boned individual with an open countenance, partly concealed by all of that week's whiskers.

"You are the gentleman who wishes to pay me \$1 for a five-cent cigar?" Harmony asked.

The man nodded and grinned sheepishly. He held up his dollar bill. Harmony received it and handed him the smoke.

"Examine it carefully and don't lose it," the professor advised him. "You can't tell but what I may want that particular cigar again."

The buyer pocketed his cigar and returned to his seat.

Harmony resumed his lecture and presently introduced the Barcelona Bear Cat in her passionate dances of the Southland. Following her act Harmony came on again, and I then saw that he was really the show, and the others were trimmings. Finally Omar's turn came, the singing act which wound up the regular performance, and the less said about Omar the better.

Harmony Childs wound up the evening's festivities. He appeared just as Omar sidled off, and he demanded to know, before sending us all home, whether the man who had bought the cigar was still present. He was.

"Come down here in front," Harmony ordered, and the whiskered citizen stumbled down the aisle.

"Have you still got that cigar you bought of me?" Harmony asked.

"Yes, sir," said the fellow. "You bought it from me, didn't you? It was a straight out-and-out sale, wasn't it?"

"Sure," grinned the purchaser.

"All right," Harmony continued. "Now I'd like to buy it back from you. I'll pay you two dollars for it."

The man gulped audibly, handed the cigar to Harmony and took the two dollars. Every one present observed the transaction, and the wonder grew. Harmony then bade his audience good night and urged them to come again and bring their friends.

"Remember—it's a free show, every night this week," he con-

the Strong Man

Illustrated by Henry Raleigh

cluded, and Joseph City stumbled out into the darkness, trying to decide just exactly what kind of a lunatic H. Childs might be.

ON Tuesday evening the crowd was a block long and it broke down part of the Opera House before they could get the doors open. So far as the performance was concerned, it was identical with that of Monday night. Harmony appeared before and after each act, and this time he began by selling half a dozen five-cent cigars for \$2 each. Then he branched out. He plucked a hair from his raven locks and held it between his fingers. The audience watched him dumbly, and had he announced that he was about to hang

then on to refuse to buy a single cigar, thus leaving the plain dupes of Joseph City to go on to their own destruction.

On Thursday night the professor was confronted by his very largest audience, and every human being there present had money in his pocket which he intended to double before retiring for the night.

The air in the Opera House was electrically charged. Harmony was in fine fettle. When he started selling the El Cabbajo cigars, all he had to do was to open the box.

"Is there any liberal-minded citizen within sound of my voice willing to pay me \$15 for a five-cent cigar?" he asked, and in the rush that followed strong men were mowed down and seats strained at their moorings. He disposed of cigars with both hands, and then retired smilingly to make way for the Barcelona Bear Cat.

After that he reappeared and sold

his troop. It was learned in no time at all that the Childs Road Show, including the Barcelona Bear Cat, Kearney and dogs, Hiller and Hiller, and the professor himself, had gone somewhere else, and that the tenor singer was practically all that was left.

The scene that follows not only beggars description, but murders it and buries the body. Two dozen persons attempted to annihilate Omar at the same instant, and his life was only saved because that many can't work on such a small man at the same time. I shouldered my way toward him and a large black object seemed to fall on me. That is all I remember.

THERE is a nice hospital in Templeton, the next town down the railroad from Joseph City, and because there are no accommodations for wounded in Joseph City we were removed. When I opened my eyes a sweet-faced nurse was feeding Omar some warm milk through a tube. I have never seen a sadder spectacle than Omar Gill was on that sunny morning with the sun streaming in on his bandages.

He had returned to consciousness ahead of me, and the very first thing he said referred to financial matters.

"George," he said wanly, "there's \$30 we never will lay eyes on. Never in this world. You were right, George. I ought to have got that in advance."

"Huh," I laughed harshly, "and we said Harmony Childs was crazy. At least you did. The trouble with you and me, we're too sane altogether."

"And," said Omar, moaning softly, "now I know why he was so darned particular about me being a strong man with no heart disease and such. Now I do know."

"Sure," I said. "He said his last singer was ineligible. He's lucky he ain't interred, too."

Naturally, the whole thing was easy to see from a couple of soft pillows in the Templeton Hospital. It appears that Harmony and his road show had quietly sneaked out of Joseph City during the most interesting part of the performance. They embarked on the 10:40 train going north, with Omar singing them to safety, like old Horatio at the bridge.

WE WERE in the Templeton Hospital for going on two weeks recovering slowly from wounds, abrasions and sprains. Omar had two ribs that healed rather slowly. Toward the end of the second week the door opened and a smiling gentleman entered. It was Harmony Childs.

"Well, well," he said in the booming voice that always distinguished him. "They laid you out, did they? I rather thought they would." Omar laid down his book. "Kill him, George," he said. "Go on, kill him. You're up, and I'm not any too well."

"Harken to me," Harmony said, still smiling and holding up his hand. "I'm your friend."

"George," said Omar in the same low tone, "ask me going to let this man get away alive?"

"I like you, too," Harmony persisted. "I've taken a real fancy to you; that's why I came back here, where, I might add, I linger at some personal risk."

"George," said Omar, "you'll find a gun in the bureau."

"My company," continued Harmony, "is now disbanded and of no further use. It likewise is in a Nevada jail and will remain until the fall term of court. I escaped and came straight to find out how you were getting on. The road show business is played out, and I am about to quit it and take up other lines. As I say, I took a fancy to you two the minute I saw you, and I need a couple of partly intelligent helpers. If you had any brains you might get somewhere, and I am prepared to supply the brains and take you in as partners. We shall form a combination in which I shall do all the thinking. If you care to join me we will all make money, and as an evidence of my good faith I shall now hand you a couple of hundred each. Are you on or not?"

I looked at the roll of bills and then glanced at Omar.

"See if it's real money," he suggested, and I did.

Harmony stood there smiling and wagging his currency.

"Do we go in with him?" I inquired of the invalid.

"Sure," Omar replied. "Only I'm all through singing. If we start a partnership, it is hereby understood that I don't sing."

"You never did sing," said Harmony, and then I relieved him of the cash before he changed his mind.

ROUGHLY, that is how we came to link up with Harmony Childs

